

REPORT No. 3—Millinery.

MILLINERY is a less complicated and extensive industry than dressmaking, and affords employment to a much smaller number of persons. It is carried on sometimes as a distinct business, sometimes as an auxiliary to the dressmaking, but principally in connection with drapery establishments, as a means of promoting the sale of material in the retail department. The goods manufactured are for "order" and "stock," terms which are sufficiently self-explanatory, and between these the demand is about equally divided. There is also a small class of contractors who trim large numbers of hats and bonnets for wholesale firms. When the summer or winter fashions are coming in there is sometimes a rush of employment, and hundreds of dozens of hats or bonnets of a particular shape or style are required as quickly as they can be made. The wholesale houses supply shapes and all materials except linings, which are furnished by the contractors, who sometimes carry on business as retail milliners, but usually have no shops, doing the work in their own homes or in rooms hired for the purpose.

ACCOMMODATION.

Whilst the provisions for the health, comfort, and convenience of workers are not in any instance decidedly bad, there is still much room for improvement, especially in connection with the sanitary arrangements. In twenty-seven establishments, important enough to be separately noted, the accommodation may be classified as follows:—

	Good.	Fair.	Poor or no provision.
Light	13	10	4
Ventilation	15	8	4
Cubic space	13	9	5
Sanitary arrangements	9	11	7
Heating	4	4	19

HOURS OF LABOUR.

The usual hours of labour for milliners are from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on five days a week, with an hour's rest at midday, and 1 p.m. on Saturdays. In one or two cases 6 p.m. is the closing time on every alternate Saturday, and in others on every Saturday, the reason for these long hours being that customers frequently require alterations to be made at once in hats or bonnets purchased during the afternoon. In cases where milliners act as sales-women their duties in the latter capacity detain them till 10 p.m. on Saturdays.

OVERTIME.

The specified hours are observed with great punctuality, and overtime occurs only on the rare occasions when a pressing order must be completed by a given time. For this reason, as well as for its tasteful and artistic character, the business is highly approved by parents, who prefer that their daughters should not keep irregular hours, nor be compelled to return home unprotected at late hours of the night. Extra pay is not given when overtime does occur, and only one establishment allows tea money on such occasions.

DIVISION OF LABOUR.

Independent milliners generally keep shops for displaying their goods, and act both as sales-women and head milliners, but in a few cases the principals attend only to the sale of materials, and employ qualified assistants for the millinery department. The other grade of workers are apprentices, improvers, trimmers, or assistants, forewomen or heads of tables, and head milliners. In some of the large city drapery shops the head milliners are, properly speaking, managers of the millinery department and head sales-women, who buy all the materials required for the shop, and supervise the general working of the department, but do no actual trimming themselves. In some of the smaller retail shops, where the millinery business is not sufficient to occupy the full time of the assistants, when work is slack, and in the evening when sales at the counter are brisk, they act as sales-women, and generally receive higher wages than are usually paid to trimmers.

APPRENTICES.

Apprentices are never bound by indenture, but are taken on verbal agreements between parent and employer. They are seldom admitted under 14 years of age, and their term of probation, usually completed in one establishment, ranges from six months to two years. From three to four years are required to gain proficiency as a trimmer, beyond which grade the chances of promotion are very remote. In some establishments apprentices are taught something of the business, but in others are made use of to wait upon the more advanced workers, and are left to pick up the business as best they can. They are given only the simplest and roughest work until they have had considerable experience, and it is only when they possess natural ability and quickness that a share of the better work falls to their lot. The majority have no special natural gifts, and their promotion is consequently slow.

IMPROVERS.

Owing to the high place this industry holds in their estimation girls rarely fail to complete the term of apprenticeship with their first employer, and are generally desirous of remaining in the same service as improvers—a desire not always gratified, because of the excessive supply of this class of labour. Excepting those who display talent above the average, probationers must serve from one to two years as apprentices, and from one to four or five years as improvers. In the superior grade there is consequently a large body of fairly competent milliners who do the work of trimmers, but are called improvers, and receive improvers' pay. On the other hand, if they display more than ordinary talent their promotion is rapid enough until they become trimmers, when the openings for further progress are distinguished by their rarity.

WAGES.

Apprentices in some establishments receive no pay during their term of probation; in others, none for the first three, six, nine, twelve, or eighteen months; and in four only of the cases inquired into are they paid from the beginning, the wages being 1s. 3d. per week for the first, and 2s. 6d. per week for the second half year in one case, and 2s. 6d. per week for the first year in the remaining three. In the absence of indentures the conditions are regulated by the employers on their own particular systems; and there is, on that account, considerable diversity and great difficulty in forming an accurate general estimate, but it may be accepted as a rule with few exceptions that 2s. 6d. and 5s. are the wages paid about the end of the first and second years respectively. In one case a lump sum of £2 10s. is paid at the end of the first year to ensure completion of the term, no allowance being made for any shorter period.

For improvers the range of payment is from 4s. to 15s. a week in most cases, though in houses where no pay is given until the term of apprenticeship is complete they usually start on 2s. 6d. a week, rising to 7s. 6d., or it may be 10s., a week about the end of the second year. The greater number of houses give 10s. a week as their maximum for improvers, those who receive more being possessed of more than average ability, and reaching the grade of trimmers without undergoing any long terms of probation in the inferior grades. Trimmers, or assistants of exceptional talent, capable of filling positions of responsibility, may sometimes receive as much as 30s. a week, but the highest rate, in most cases, is from 20s. to 25s. a week for first-class hands, the ordinary wages being from 12s. 6d. to 15s. a week, though 10s. a week is by no means rare. Details have been obtained concerning the wages paid at a number of establishments employing altogether 168 hands, consisting of 84 improvers, 58 assistants, 13 forewomen or heads of tables, and 13 head milliners and head saleswomen. The rates of payment for these were obtained from the employers, and are set out in the following table side by side with the rates obtained directly from 81 employees, of whom 36 were improvers, 28 assistants, and 17 forewomen.

Employers' Statement.				Employees' Statement.		
Class.	Highest Wage.	Lowest Wage.	Average.	Highest Wage.	Lowest Wage.	Average.
	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.
Improvers	0 15 0	0 4 0	0 8 6	0 12 6	0 2 6	0 7 1
Assistants	1 10 0	0 10 0	0 17 8	1 5 0	0 7 6	0 15 5
Forewomen	2 15 0	1 10 0	1 16 0	3 10 0	0 17 0	1 16 8
Head milliners	5 0 0	2 0 0	3 0 0			

A comparison of these statements indicates that the wages of improvers and assistants range between lower figures, and that the range for forewomen is between wider figures than those given by the employers. In the most fashionable establishments the head milliners and forewomen are not seldom brought direct from London or Paris, and in such cases of course receive payment on the highest scale.

EARNINGS.

Girls engaged in the millinery business are generally fairly educated, and belong to a class accustomed to the enjoyment of a considerable degree of comfort. As a rule the parents or relations with whom they reside are fairly well-to-do, and assert that their girls go to business not so much for the sake of earning money as for learning a useful accomplishment likely to be of service in the family circle. They are seldom entirely dependent upon their earnings, except in the higher grades, where the income is usually sufficient for comfortable existence. For those who have no other means the wages in the lower grades are utterly inadequate, and are not improved by the custom in many large houses of giving holidays in the slack periods, during the months of February and August. This compulsory idleness extends for from two weeks to a month, and must add materially to the troubles and difficulties the workers have to endure. The fact that but few of them are supported by their own earnings is, in part, responsible for the general complaint among trimmers that they are underpaid, for girls who have other means are willing to work for less than those who have not. The number ready to accept almost any terms is largely in excess of the requirements of the industry, so that, under existing conditions, the grievance admits of no simple remedy. The rate of wages is affected to a considerable extent by the existence of a number of semi-amateur workers, with whom the amount of pay is of less importance than a knowledge of the practical part of the business with which they desire to become acquainted, but with no intention of devoting themselves to it as a means of earning their livelihood.

HEALTH, &c.

In striking contrast with the pale and sickly looks of those who are subjected to much overtime work, and the consequent long hours of fasting and fatigue, a bright and healthy appearance is one of the most noticeable characteristics of milliners, and bears testimony both to the wholesomeness of their occupation and to the injury inflicted upon those who are deprived of their proper amount of rest and nourishment. Millinery work is lighter, of a less trying nature, and carried on under more favourable conditions than any other similar industry. The operatives usually occupy a somewhat higher social standing than the majority of girls employed away from their homes, and with few exceptions they reside with their parents, who appear to be well able to maintain them in comfort. Employers and forewomen in authority over them speak highly of their conduct and morality, and inquiries in other directions generally sustain the favourable opinion expressed by them of the girls engaged in the millinery industry.

The oil has then to be packed for market. Very ingenious apparatus is used for stamping out and bending the tins, as well as for soldering the edges where necessary, and, in fact, it takes but a minute or two for the glittering sheets of tin to be converted into handsom 2-gallon tins. The wooden cases, each to hold two tins, are also made by machinery in a marvellously short space of time, and the kerosene oil is ready to take its place upon the market. But the manufacturers complain that they cannot compete against the kerosene oil imported from America, which is mostly obtained from wells, and goes through very few processes before it is ready for sale, consequently is produced so much more cheaply, and the remedy they suggest is of course an increased duty on the imported article. They assert that an increase from the present duty of 6d. to 1s. per gallon would enable them to meet the American article on equal terms, when they would, from the superior quality of their product, be certain to increase largely the demand for it.

The following are about the average wages earned at the shale mines and works :—

Miners	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	10/-	per day.
Engine-drivers	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8/6	"
Roads men	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	10/-	"
Labourers in the mines	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	7/-	"
Boys	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3/- to 4/-	"
Retort men	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8/-	"
Refiners	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8/6	"
Labourers in the works	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6/6	"